

Read and Respond: The ‘Y’ generation speaks

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Abstract

The age of revolutionised internet fora has addressed Swain’s (1985) primordial concern for successful language acquisition as interaction platforms for non-native speakers of the ‘Y’ generation. This paper reports a study investigating the effects reading materials, influence of background knowledge and sentence preference in forum contributions of two groups of university students pioneered through an online forum endeavor conducted after classroom hours. Contributions on current issues displayed evident findings of how reading materials are perceived and value of freedom of expression proves the vibrance of internet fora no longer serve learners as conservative training grounds but a discourse arena.

Keywords: reading material, background knowledge, sentence preference, online discussion;

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1. Introduction

Twenty years ago the word 'surfing' would conjure up images of men and women catching waves on a board 2 metres long in the ocean. The sport still exists but the word now is synonymous with something which is now done on the net or internet and is arguably the most common activity done worldwide. Along with surfing; googling, blogging, texting, emailing, poking, chatting; these are words that are part of the fabric of what is known as Generation Y. A generation that has grown up surrounded by a media explosion where instant communication is standard practice and technology is seen as an everyday essential.

In order to keep up with the demands of the Y generation education has been forced to change, to modernise and to become a mirror of what is happening in society. As such education has gone online and promotes what is known as Computer Mediated Communication. Levy (1997) describes CMC as being concerned with "communication between two or more participants via a computer covering technological platforms such as e-mail, bulletin board, discussion list and computer conferencing, both text and video-based" Online forums and discussion boards are one of the most popular forms of CMC and to this day many studies have been done to discuss the merits of using this form of communication as an educational tool.

Online forums are becoming increasingly common components in courses and classroom settings in order to promote student critical thinking, knowledge construction and language learning autonomy (Lim & Chai 2004; Marra, Moore & Klimczak 2004) and based on the findings of previous studies these forums seem to help enhance and support existing teaching and learning processes.

MyLinE is an English language learning website which is currently used in all public universities throughout Malaysia. One of the major educational and communicative tools of MyLinE is the Lounge. The Lounge is comprised of eight forums ranging from Movie reviews to Correct my English. It is also used as form of assessment for English language courses undertaken by several universities. As such it is important for MyLinE to continuously analyse and improve the forums in order to provide the best possible platform to enable and promote communication, interaction as well as good teaching and assessment items. This study aims to analyse three different factors which could give further insights into the type of participation and interaction in the forums and aid in the construction of future forums.

2. Topic of discussions

The first part of this study is concerned with how the subjects of the topics aids or hinders participation in the forums. This is especially important for MyLinE as in the future the results will provide more information about how to achieve high levels of participation through the right choice of topic. The 5 topics used in the ten forums were carefully selected in order to identify any obvious patterns. This study is focused on whether students are more participative in forums that are more relevant to them i.e. situations they have experienced (e.g abolishment of UPSR and Ragging), and whether students are participative in topics that are deemed to be sensitive discussion topics in Malaysia (politics). Other topics (gangsterism, men and women, streetkids) were more general in order to allow for comparisons. Participation was determined by the number of words in each forum.

2.1 The effect of the reading texts

MyLinE forums are made up of two types of forums. The first are forums that include texts. The Read and Respond section in MyLine is one such forum. Students read the text and then post their opinions or any thoughts that they have about the text. The second type of forums are forums whereby a topic is given or introduced by a student in the form of a question or a title and people respond to the topic. Many studies have shown that

participation and interaction in forums are important for learning and to enhance a sense of online community. Therefore it is important to identify which type of forum encourages the most amount of participation. This study will investigate whether or not the presence of reading material posted by the teacher will affect the participation of students in the forums. For the purpose of this study participation is defined as the number of postings in each topic as well as the number of total words and this will be measured in five text based forums (RR) and five forums without texts (RO).

2.2 Preference of simple, compound or complex sentences

This study will analyse the kind of language students at UTM produce in their English writing focusing mainly on sentence structure and how the complexity of each structure affects the frequency with which that language is produced. Structural complexity can be generally defined as “the ability to produce writing that shows how ideas and large chunks of information are represented with the use of subordination and embedded subordinate clauses” (Marefat 2011). As such Simple and Compound sentences which have no subordinate clauses would be classified as being more simple structures whilst complex sentences would indicate more syntactically complex structures which as found by King and Just (1991) in their experimental studies are more difficult to process. This is corroborated by a study carried out by Al-Musalli & Al-Harhi (2011) which showed that students perceived Simple sentences (83%) to be the easiest to produce followed by Compound sentences whilst Complex sentences were perceived to be the most difficult to produce. However, the findings from both Marefat (2004) on intermediate students and Al-Musalli & Al-Harhi (2011) showed that the level of frequency was not related to the syntactic complexity of the sentence types. In both studies the complex sentences were most frequently produced (46% and 41% respectively) which contradicted the complexity perception. Simple sentences were produced slightly less frequently (35% and 39%). Compound sentences were found to be produced much less frequently (6% and 12%). Thus in this study the type of each sentence (simple, compound or complex) will be identified and counted to ascertain which is the most commonly used sentence structure and whether the findings match those by Musali and Marefat.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study was designed to provide evidence of the influence of reading article as discussion resource as well as topic selection in asynchronous online forum among university students. This research involved two classes of first year English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduates enrolled in their first English literacy class, one of which is tagged as ‘Read and Respond’ group and the other ‘Respond Only’ group. A total of 64 students were conveniently sampled based on the classes assigned to the researchers (who are teachers for the groups).

3.2 Research Process

Using the MyLinE system, students are first grouped according to the list of names given by the faculty to avoid erroneous posting in the form. Designated links to respected ‘Read and Respond’ and ‘Respond Only’ forum were created to clearly direct students to their respective forum. Six weeks from the first semester of the 2010/2011 academic year were allocated for both groups to interact on six discussion themes (refer to Figure 1). Both groups were given similar duration of one week to partake in the discussion voluntarily without grading incentive beyond the classroom hours. Each group was briefed separately and was not informed of the presence of one another.

During the briefing, students were asked to share their opinions and discuss assigned topics in online forums as a voluntary course project on a weekly basis for six weeks outside the classroom hours to supplement their student

learning time. Students were then familiarised to the concept of online forums in MyLinE and later demonstrated the steps on how to post in the forums. Each student was given unlimited number of postings on all topics with full autonomy of expressing their opinions with modicum interference by the researchers.

Table 1. Discussion Themes

Themes
Topic 1: Men vs Women
Topic 2: Politics
Topic 3: Ragging
Topic 4: Street Kids
Topic 5: Public Examinations
Topic 6: Gangsterism

3.2.1 Read and Respond group

In order to observe the role of reading article as discussion resource in an online forum, six preselected reading articles taken from online newspaper sites are posted sequentially each week in the 'Read and Respond' group forum according to theme in Figure 1 by the researchers. Copies of the reading article were printed and distributed in class to insure each student have read the article before they start posting in the online forum.

3.2.2 Respond Only group

Themes procured from preselected articles for 'Read and Respond' group were used as title of topics to prompt this group's discussion. Unlike the 'Read and Respond' group, this group was not guided by the content of the reading article, therefore providing copious freedom for them to discuss the fluidity and depth of each topic.

3.3 Data Analysis

Forum postings from both 'Read and Respond' group and 'Respond Only' group were the primary data in this study. The total number of forum postings by each student of each group were counted, tabulated and examined. However, only ten most active contributors to the forums from each group were selected and their postings were examined in gaining extensive insight towards achieving the research objectives of this study. Data of total number of postings for all six topics, total number of words in each topic and total number of words for all six topics by these ten selected students from each group were then isolated and later averaged in terms of words produced in each topic and average of words produced in each posting. The results are then analysed quantitatively to determine the significance of reading article as discussion resource in online forums on individual as well as group performance comparatively in both groups. Apart from studying the role of reading article as discussion resource, each student's forum contributions for each topic and between the two groups were also examined to discern whether topic or theme familiarity could trigger use of background knowledge and influence the extent of their contributions. Another substantial finding observed in their forum contributions was preferences in types of sentence used. A total of 680 sentences from all six topics produced by all ten students were categorised and compared between the two groups according to frequencies of simple sentences, compound sentences and complex sentences.

4. Findings and Discussions

This section of the paper highlights the findings and discussions of the study based on the three research questions which are:

1. Does the presence of reading material affect the participation in the forums?
2. How does background knowledge influence participation in the forums?
3. What is the preferred type of sentence used by the subjects in the forums?

4.1 The effects of reading materials on participation in the forum

In addressing the above research question, the total number of postings made, the total number of words used by the subjects and the total number of words used according to topics in both the Read and Respond (RR) group and the Respond Only (RO) groups will be discussed. The results on the number of postings and the number of words used by the subjects in the RR group are as shown in Table 1 and for the RO group in Table 2.

Table 2. Total number of postings and number of words used by RR group

READ AND RESPOND (RR)								
Subject	No. of postings	Number of words (according topic)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
RR1	9	99	102	135	72	190	133	731
RR2	8	0	0	0	85	117	99	301
RR3	7	0	111	113	114	0	141	479
RR4	6	0	84	55	165	202	265	771
RR5	6	98	244	286	499	241	342	1710
RR6	5	0	0	55	67	96	77	295
RR7	5	0	0	149	0	0	149	298
RR8	4	0	0	228	102	145	0	475
RR9	4	0	0	50	46	108	118	322
RR10	4	0	0	0	0	187	114	301
Total	58	197	541	1071	1150	1286	1438	5683

4.1.1 Number of postings

The total number of postings made by each of the ten subjects in the RR group ranges between four to nine postings only making a total of 58 postings altogether for the six topics given to be discussed in the online forum.

However, for the RO group, the number is much higher ranging from six to fifteen postings made by each by the ten subjects. The total number of postings made by this group is 94, almost doubling the number made by the RR group.

4.1.2 Total number of words used by the subjects

For the RR group, the total number of words used by the subjects for the six topics discussed ranges from 295 to 1710 words; a difference of 1695 words between the highest and the lowest, with subject RR5 producing an exceptionally high number of words at 1710 whilst seven out of ten producing less than 500 words each. The range in the number of words used by the RO group however, is not as wide as that of the RR group. The number of words for this group ranges between 206 and 1285; a difference of 1079 words only.

4.1.3 Total number of words used based on topics

A clear distinction can be seen in terms of the number of words used by the subjects in both groups based on the topics of the discussion. For the RR group, the total number of words used increased from 197 words only for Topic 1 (Men vs Women) to 1438 words for Topic 6 (Gangsterism), a difference of 1241 words between the highest and the lowest number of words based on topics. The total number of words increased gradually as the weeks developed. However, a totally different pattern is seen for the RO group where the total number of words ranges between 458 words for Topic 2 (Politics) to 1264 for Topic 3 (Ragging), a difference of only 806 words between the highest and the lowest. A different pattern in terms of the total number of words is seen for this group where the total number does not increase with time.

The presence of the reading materials does have a direct influence on the number of postings where in the RR group, the number of postings is lesser than that on the RO group as the reading material limits the participation of subjects in the forum. Expression of ideas by the RR group is confined and controlled by the content of the article. On the other hand, background knowledge of a topic has a direct effect on the number of words used by the RO group.

Table 3. Total number of postings and number of words used by RO group

READ AND RESPOND (RR)								
Subject	No. of postings	Number of words (according topic)						Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	
RO1	15	184	85	298	197	204	317	1285
RO2	14	244	24	154	81	150	199	852
RO3	11	0	143	85	125	147	27	527
RO4	10	17	0	50	60	61	61	249
RO5	9	32	0	59	10	154	50	305
RO6	9	0	0	262	19	190	139	610
RO7	8	0	28	180	46	37	71	362
RO8	6	73	131	72	109	101	64	550
RO9	6	17	18	64	40	37	30	206

RO10	6	39	29	40	44	61	59	272
Total	94	606	458	1264	731	1142	1017	5218

4.2 The influence of background knowledge on participation in the forum

The above research question will be addressed based on the contribution made by the subjects in terms of the number of words used according to the topics given. These data are as shown in Table 3 for the RR group and Table 4 for the RO group.

Table 4. Number of words used by RR group according to topics

READ AND RESPOND (RR)							
Subject	Number of words (according topic)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
RR1	99	102	135	72	190	133	731
RR2	0	0	0	85	117	99	301
RR3	0	111	113	114	0	141	479
RR4	0	84	55	165	202	265	771
RR5	98	244	286	499	241	342	1710
RR6	0	0	55	67	96	77	295
RR7	0	0	149	0	0	149	298
RR8	0	0	228	102	145	0	475
RR9	0	0	50	46	108	118	322
RR10	0	0	0	0	187	114	301
Total	197	541	1071	1150	1286	1438	5683

The total number of words used by subjects differs from topic to topic. For the RR group, Topic 1 (Men vs Women) recorded the least total number of words at only 197 between the 10 subjects. However, the total number of words increased to 541 for Topic 2 (Politics), 1071 for Topic 3 (Ragging), 1150 for Topic 4 (Street Kids), 1286 for Topic 5 (Public Examination) and the number reaches its highest at 1438 for Topic 6 (Gangsterism). One significant observation is that the total number of words produced by the subjects increased as the semester progressed totalling to 5683 words for the RR group. For the RO group, a different pattern is observed where the total number of words

produced based on topics is not as clear cut as that of the RR group. Topic 1 received a total of 606 words, Topic 2, 458 words but Topic 3 saw a huge leap in the number of words to 1264. The number decreased again to 731 for Topic 4, increased to 1142 for Topic 5 and 1017 for Topic 6. The findings show that Topics 3 and 5 have a much higher number of words produced by the subjects among the RO group. The total number of words produced by the 10 subjects in the RO group is 5218 words. The pattern seen here is that the number of words used by the subjects in the RO group does not progress with time, unlike its RR counterpart.

All in all, the total number of words used by the RR group is higher than that of the RO group. One possible explanation to this could be that the RR group has texts to refer to assist them in developing the schemata for the topic and these act as a background knowledge and information for the subjects to use in their discussion. They can extract information from the reading text, learn from it and re-use them in their discussion. Thus, even if the subjects have no background knowledge on a topic, they can always rely on the text to assist them in the discussion. The RO group on the other hand does not have the privilege to read from a given text. All that is given to them is a topic and they are forced to discuss them whether or not they have enough knowledge on the topics given. Thus, for a topic which they know little about such as *Politics* (because university students are not encouraged to discuss such issue), they are not able to form opinions on. For topics which they have background knowledge on such as *Public Examination* and *Ragging* (they have gone through several public examinations in the past and ragging is very much discussed by the media) the total number of words used by the subjects is very much higher.

Table 5. Number of words used by RO group according to topics

READ AND RESPOND (RO)							
Subject	Number of words (according topic)						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
RO1	184	85	298	197	204	317	731
RO2	244	24	154	81	150	199	301
RO3	0	143	85	125	147	27	479
RO4	17	0	50	60	61	61	771
RO5	32	0	59	10	154	50	1710
RO6	0	0	262	19	190	139	295
RO7	0	28	180	46	37	71	298
RO8	73	131	72	109	101	64	475
RO9	17	18	64	40	37	30	322
RO10	39	29	40	44	61	59	301
Total	606	458	1264	731	1142	1017	5683

4.3 Preferred type of sentences used by subjects in the forum

To address the research question on the type of sentences used by the subjects in their forum, the total number of sentences produced by the subjects will be counted according to the different categories of sentences, namely

Simple Sentence (SS), Compound Sentence (CS) and Complex Sentence (CX). The findings are as shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

For the RR group, a total of 119 SS were used by the 10 subjects in their postings for the six topic discussed. Another 86 sentences used are CS and 132 are CX. In short, in terms of types of sentences produced, CX receives the highest number, followed by SS and CS, the lowest. For the RO group, the type of sentences which receives the highest number of use is SS at 144, followed by CX at 116 and the least number of sentences used is CS with only 69 recorded. One significant observation of the findings is that both SS and CX record a higher number of use for both RR and RO groups although in the former CX is higher than SS while in the latter SS is higher than CX.

The above findings could be related to the fact that CS has always been regarded as more difficult to use than CX and also CS has a much lesser number of linkers to choose from to form it as compared to the choice of linkers for the formation of CX.

Table 6. Types of sentences used by the RR group

RR	SS	CS	CX
1	11	11	7
2	14	6	5
3	5	9	14
4	6	7	27
5	22	31	44
6	11	0	8
7	13	8	12
8	15	2	7
9	12	5	5
10	10	7	3
	119	86	132
Total		337	

Table 7. Types of sentences used by the RO group

RO	SS	CS	CX
1	54	15	32
2	15	10	12
3	7	7	14
4	10	5	2
5	8	1	10
6	14	10	7
7	16	3	7
8	9	6	20
9	5	7	2
10	6	5	10
	54	15	32
Total		329	

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